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Images Can Make Powerful Slam Dunk Digital Lessons

By Jamie McKenzie

([about author](#))

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The Internet suffers from a novel form of poverty . . . the poverty of abundance. When classroom teachers seek lessons that focus on higher level thinking, match tough state curriculum standards but deliver efficiency and punch in a matter of minutes, the Net can be disappointing. Without such structured lessons, they and their students can drown in info-glut and info-garbage.

Teachers need well tested 30 minute learning challenges that inspire their students to do the thinking and learning. This article outlines an approach to instructional design that takes advantage of mammoth photo archives and locally photographed images or prints from the school's vertical file.

Requiring students to interpret photographs, paintings and other images is not an entirely new skill for teachers, as many teachers have applied such strategies in the decades prior to the spread of classroom computers, but the recent zeal for technology sometimes threw us off course. Pedagogy - effective teaching strategies - too often took a back seat to the tools and the toys. Instructional design and lesson development were rarely offered as elements in professional development for the use of new technologies.

A single powerful image can form the basis of an excellent lesson, generating a solid half hour of intense, thoughtful discussion and exploration. The goal is to find just the right image or combination of images to provoke the learning desired.

Making these choices is no simple matter. Nor is the development of an essential question to accompany the image(s). This article outlines the process in user friendly steps.

Which Powerful Image?

The photographs below were captured by my digital camera in Birmingham, Alabama while visiting the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Teachers may use this approach to collect images or may find excellent collections on the Net (sources listed later).

1. If you had the eleven photos below to support a lesson on the civil rights movement, which image would hold the most promise for an excellent learning experience?

If you click on any of the images below, your browser will open a new window with a gallery of Civil Right Images. These images are used here with the permission of the Birmingham Parks and Recreation Department whose director graciously granted permission.



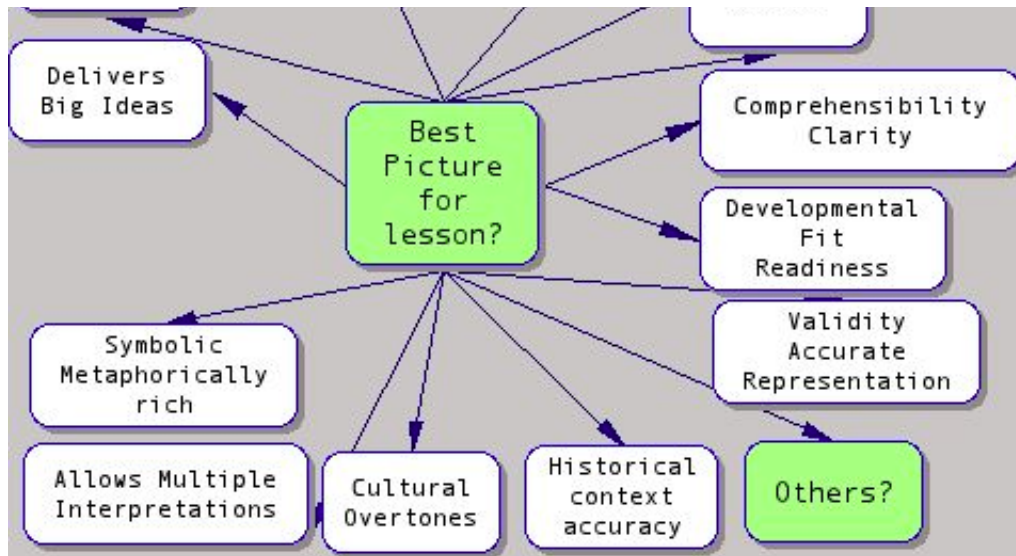


Making wise choices, whether it be the selection of a governor, a cancer treatment or a photograph for a lesson, puts us at the top of Bloom's Taxonomy and requires at least two things:

1. Clear selection criteria
2. Evidence

A group of educators in White Plains, New York, wrestled with this choice of photograph recently and came up with an Inspiration™ diagram to outline the criteria they would apply to the task.





Which Powerful Question?

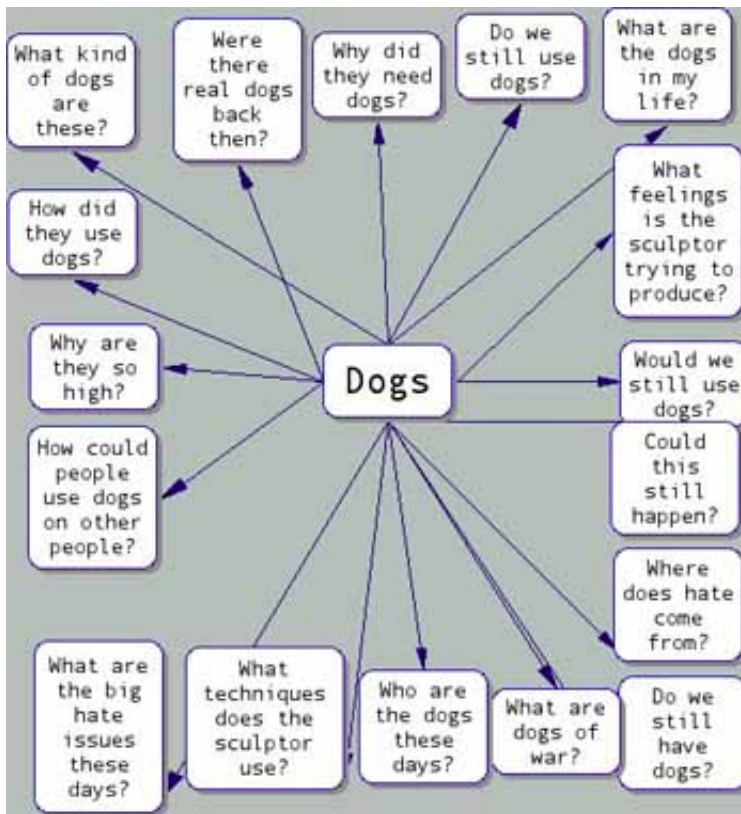
Once the teacher identifies the image worthy of a class discussion, the search begins for a provocative essential question to guide that discussion.

Sometimes a single powerful question emerges almost immediately, but this process usually requires some brainstorming spread over time. A few interludes of an hour or more allow for subconscious percolation and imaginative production as one goes about other business, cooking dinner, listening to music or crawling home through rush hour traffic.



The goal of brainstorming is to produce LOTS of questions without worrying about the QUALITY of questions until later. Frequently, the pressure to produce a GREAT or ESSENTIAL question right off the bat creates so much performance anxiety that many folks freeze up or get "questioner's block."

This brainstorming leads to more than

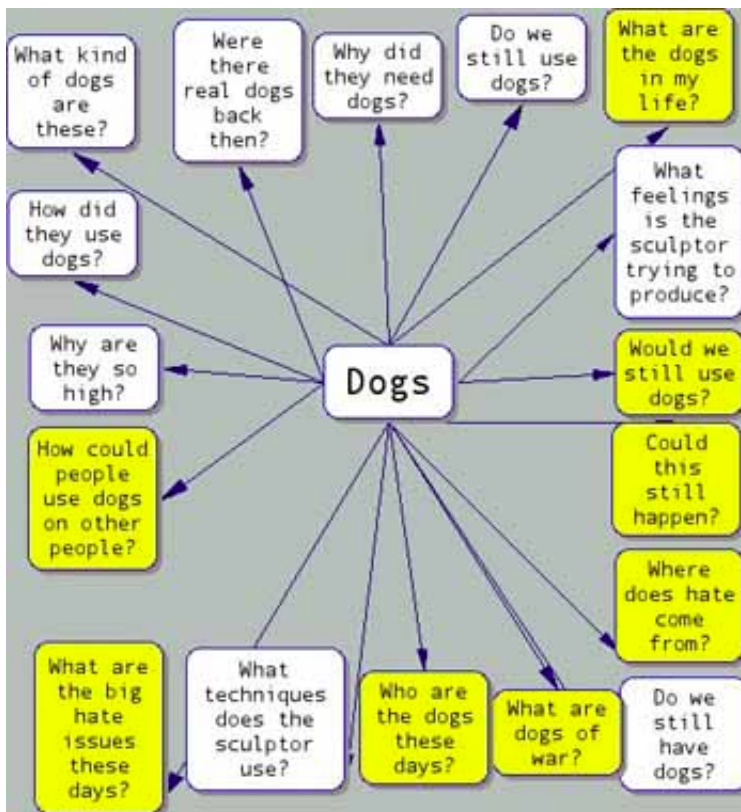


a dozen possibilities, some of which would serve better as discussion questions than others.

Some require explanation, definition and clarification.

Others probe realms of meaning that are profound and elusive.

The items in the diagram can be grouped by levels of depth and colored differently.



It turns out that each essential question spawns dozens of other questions. A lesson plan for discussion of a high impact graphic would usually include a questioning stage with the class.

If the essential question is "Could this still happen today?" what are the subsidiary questions we need to explore to build an answer to that question?

Slam Dunk Digital Lessons

The whole idea of a slam dunk digital lesson is simplicity, efficiency and ease of use. The lesson lasts a single class period but is well organized, reliable and challenging. The thinking required to interpret the deeper meanings of the image tends to match the tough standards required by most states.

Images can provoke deep thought if they are selected with that quality in mind and the ensuing discussion is orchestrated by the teacher to encourage a wide range of response.

Resources

As mentioned earlier, teachers may create their own digital collections by taking advantage of digital cameras. They may also engage their students in collecting images to match the curriculum focus. (See FNO article, "The New Vertical File" at <http://fno.org/oct00/vertical.html>). Finally, they may take advantage of the collections available on the Web.

Collections on the Web often raise issues of copyright. When teachers build lessons around images, they need to consider whether the images are public domain or proprietary. Because there are few restrictions on public domain images, these tend to be the best source for digital lessons.

A particularly good listing of public domain images has been compiled by Joyce Valenza at <http://mciunix.mciu.k12.pa.us/%7espjvweb/cfimages.html>.

Other visual literacy resources:

[Museum Victoria](#)

Excellent collection of photographs and other digital resources.

[The Thinker](#)

A collection of more than 60,000 works of art from the San Francisco Fine Arts Museum.

[The Web Museum](#)

A very rich collection of paintings from hundreds of artists well supported with text passages.

[The Smithsonian](#) provides an extensive array of images and artifacts.

[The National Gallery of Art](#) offers a rich and varied online collection of paintings and other works of art.

Photographs at the [Library of Congress](#)

TimeFrames - <http://timeframes1.natlib.govt.nz/>

[Te Waimano - Waters of the Millennium](#) - a web site of Alexander Turnbull Library images to mark the beginning of the new millennium
<http://www.tewaimano.govt.nz/>

[TAPUHI](#) - this database provides access to descriptions of the unpublished manuscripts and pictures collections of New Zealand and Pacific material in

the Alexander Turnbull Library
<http://tapuhi.natlib.govt.nz/>

[Ranfurly Collection](#) - a digitized database of the entire collection of drawings, photographs and diaries created by Lord Ranfurly, Governor of New Zealand from 1897 to 1904.

<http://tepuna.natlib.govt.nz/abouttp/abranfurly/about.html>

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